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ABSTRACT

Planning, funding and operating anti-poverty programs require skilled community organizers. Training organizers deals with problems of how to motivate others and what tactics should be used when difficulty is encountered. Two approaches to these problems determined by images of 20th Century Man have been employed: (1) rational economic man who emphasizes punishment as sole means for social change; and (2) irrational, destructive Freudian man who brings about social change by altering the inner lives of other people. Both approaches rely on selective portions of what is apparent in human conduct. A new perspective on man's behavior (operant psychology), which holds that the understanding of man comes through examining his behavior and the conditions under which it occurs, has emerged. A training situation was set up which placed trainees in a state of deprivation (arranging for an event to be reinforced), followed by successive approximation (gradual build up from current behaviors to the training goal behaviors). (Author/MC)

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OPERANT STRATEGIES IN THE TRAINING OF COMMUNITY ACTION ORGANIZERS *

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" This paper is dedicated to B. F. Skinner in his 65th year

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An ambitious effort to bring about permanent economic and political equity for impoverished or disenfranchised citizens of the United States has been under way since 1965. This effort was delegated to the Office of Economic Opportunity--a curious creation of a political bureaucracy. OEO was specifically directed to bypass the usual means of dealing with economic and social problems, and to create local, federally-funded, independent agencies which could change the immediate political and economic status quo, and thus change the political bureaucracy that spawned it.

To assure that the agency waging the Federal Government's war against poverty would not become another aloof, unresponsive medium for the perpetuation of poverty life-styles, OEO was obligated by Congress to strengthen itself by developing "maximum feasible participation" on the part of the poor in the program planning, funding, and operations of the various local anti-poverty agencies that it brought into being. To get the participation called for, skilled organizers of grass-roots groups were needed.

These organizers have been drawn from the populations they work with, from "outsiders" and non-poor anxious to effectuate social change, from career professionals in social work, and from retired military

personnel, to name a few sources. Their job is to go into the neighborhoods where the poor predominate and inform them of the opportunities for change if they would only band and work together. The community organizer has the skills for such organization. Having started a group, the community organizer nurtures its growth with advice and other resources to accomplish the objectives it may specify.

The more than thousand community action programs in this country share the same immediate problem. They lack trained community organizers. In 1967 OEO began to strongly oppose "service"-type community action program agencies in favor of community organization oriented ones. Since then a great deal of effort has gone into training organizers, but the results have been disappointing.

Organizational skills are not only precious commodities but also complex ones. The central body of skills the organizer applies should result in the transformation of an undifferentiated mass of people into an instrument that can satisfy their needs. Therefore, training concerns itself with the problems of how to motivate others, and of what tactics a group should use when it encounters problems. In virtually all instances the approaches to these problems have been determined by the two images of man that have had most currency in the 20th century--that of rational economic man, and that drawn from Freud with his emphasis on the irrational and self-destructive.

Economic man is portrayed as a rational animal who can calculate the cost-benefit factor of any exchange process in which he becomes engaged. Assessments of costs and benefits with respect

to the alternatives open to him will dictate his course of action. Change comes about when values in the cost/benefit ratio are altered. The Marxian analysis as well as the capitalist one works directly out of this model. They presume, however, different conditions under which it is applied. The classical capitalist position posits sufficient economic equity among all groups in the marketplace so that exchange can take place for the benefit of any two or more groups involved in such exchange. The Marxian position is that some groups have nothing to exchange, or cannot exchange equitably for they are not given the true value of the benefits they might bring to the exchange process. The only way these groups obtain equity is to increase the cost to the dominant group of the usual alternatives it chooses. This approach dismally views the process of social change as one where the undesirable activities of the ruling class are suppressed, and it has its effect in every day social action. Conflict and confrontation with punitive intention then are the major means used to achieve social objectives. The emphasis is on administration of punishment--not as a last resort but as the beginning and sole means for social change.

The Freudian model emphasizes the irrational. Man will engage in activities destructive to himself, or with very little benefit vis a vis the total energy committed to them. The emotional life of the individual, not the exchange process, is the focus of analysis. What goes on between individuals, groups and, indeed, nations is interpreted within the emotional context understood by the parties involved. Any act, therefore, has significance only in terms of the feelings and tensions of each of these parties.

Social change is brought about in the Freudian model by changing the inner life of other persons. To do this, one becomes sensitive to the behavioral nuances of feelings. These may be pride or anger or fear, but an especially prevalent one is anxiety. People are irrational, i.e., they don't behave in their best interest with respect to the long run, because they are fearful and anxious. Particular attention must be paid to these latter feelings, and specific steps taken to insure the feeling of security.

Sensitivity becomes the basic tool to change others. By being sensitive one recognizes the needs and fears of others, and creates a new situation in which these needs and fears are taken into account, which changes the emotional life of the subjects. This, in turn, changes them and, in so doing, causes them to bring about change in the social world in which they operate. Since conflict between parties may largely be a matter of misunderstanding and mistrust, making these parties aware that they have nothing to fear from each other can result in cooperation.

Both of these models rely on selective portions of what is apparent in human conduct. At times men are controlled by the workings of the external economy; at times by the inner emotional world and the forceful drives of sex or honor or fear and their impact on politics or the business system.

In the past few years a new perspective on why man behaves the way he does has emerged. It takes his behavior as is and makes few assumptions as to its bases. Operant psychology holds that understanding of man comes about through examining his

behavior and the conditions under which it occurs. It is the contingencies of reinforcement and punishment which, respectively, maintain or increase, or decrease any given set of behaviors. There is no presumption about what is reinforcing. It can be money, sex, the removal of threats; all of these or none. The terms merely refer to consequences which have been observed to increase the probability of any behavior. Punishment is defined similarly. An event is punishing if it suppresses behavior. A spanking or a police riot may be reinforcing not punishing if there is more behavior after the event than before it.

There are two critical distinctions between operant psychology and the viewpoints mentioned a moment ago. In operant psychology, there is the experimentally derived position that the human being is extraordinarily adaptable and plastic at any age level, and further the technology generated from its propositional statements on behavior is more powerful. By specially engineering the environment, groups have been developed with strong internal solidarity and trained to later change others through negotiations and positive manipulation of behavioral consequences. Goals for different groups have differed. When West Virginia whites meet the "power structure" head on, they are usually "meek." They go hat-in-hand to the "County Courthouse" and take what is given to them. A training objective for this group then was to beef up pro-social aggression; i.e., taking action on one's behalf without necessarily damaging the other party. North Carolina blacks, on the other hand, have a reputation for aversiveness. Giving them positive techniques of control was the training objective in their case. Since December 1968, 10 CAP'S have undergone such training. Three were from West

Virginia and seven from North Carolina.

Placing the trainees in a state of deprivation is an example of a well-recognized short-cut method in operant conditioning of arranging for an event to be reinforcing. The second operant principle used in the following examples was successive approximation; the gradual build up from current behaviors to the training goal behaviors.

Isolated 4-H Camp facilities were rented. Groups of five to fifteen trainees had around-the-clock training for three to four days. All persons entered the training facilities at the same time in one or more vehicles. They were presented with Ground Rules, shown their quarters, shown to the camp registration office, or merely deposited on the camp grounds just inside the gates. In all cases the trainee groups were simultaneously introduced into a strange environment and placed in a state of deprivation which they could only overcome by forming a group and negotiating with the management of the Training Institute.

They encountered a situation where there were no mattresses or bedding or towels and soap, and in the winter no heat. The initial response was bafflement and anger. The sheet on which the Ground Rules were printed was then read seriously. It simply stated that all situations were negotiable in groups of four or more people. Of ten groups introduced to this training environment all came to Institute Management to set things right. Eight groups walked in with the spokesman already selected. Seven North Carolina groups walked in angry and shouting.

Trainers were pleasant and welcoming, never behaved as though they were angry, and did not respond to threats of any kind in any way. The trainers' objective was to reinforce rational argument behaviors emitted by incoming trainee groups. When the first glimmers appeared, such as "we think we

should have blankets and pillows because you--the training staff--have them" the trainees were registered, received their bedding and were shown where the mattresses were stored. Other deprivations of the intake process were similarly negotiated.

Following the intake procedure, trainees continued to modify their environment through the medium of negotiation. Another source of modification was made possible by operationalizing the notion of equitable exchange by introducing generalized reinforcers in the form of points exchangeable for desired activities or items. Some activities and items that were a priori considered possible reinforcers turned out to be undesirable in the trainees' terms. The list of "reinforcers" -- posited and actual -- changed, Through negotiation reinforcement schedules were regulated to the mutual advantage of initially contending parties. Objectives which both trainers and trainees endorsed were realized. Trainees operated within a point economy, and by degrees changed the environment by changing the values of their economy.

Exit interviews and surveys revealed an overwhelming number of trainees and trainee teams not only changed through their experiences but were satisfied with them. Questions were asked on the benefits of the training. For example, on a question asking whether they had been provided with the general principles of human behavior, 28 of 29 people in one training session answered yes. Similar proportions were found on other items. Later reviews by independent teams of OEO evaluators have found consistently high praise for the type of training utilized. Video tapes were taken of initial negotiating sessions and compared to tapes taken of negotiations at the end of the training cycle. Interactional analysis of these tapes show a shift from using belligerent behavior for obtaining an objective to sophisticated argumentation using logic and the values of the other party.

Much of the evidence is still of a naturalistic sort, though of course all science initiates in this fashion. Much finer analytic procedures, using accounting methods are now being worked out. However, there is no doubt from the practical evidence -- evidence of success and utility -- that the utilization of behavior principles derived from its experimental analysis permits persons interested in changing social relationships to shape such changes by manipulating what is really manipulable -- the consequences of behavior.